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ABSTRACT

To study the problems of secondary schools in the context of the Surrey School District, British Columbia, it was necessary to answer the question of how to overcome secondary school inertia so as to fundamentally alter the organization or practices within it. The primary obstacle was gaining the district Management Committee's support despite its anger, denial, bargaining, and depression over material about the district found through research. Conditional acceptance of the study was obtained by developing a strategic plan of action for the committee to modify and approve. The plan, entitled "Secondary Study: Strategies for Action, 1990-91," included 10 steps, or provisions, for its review by all concerned bodies beginning with the Management Committee and including the secondary school administrators, the president of the Survey Teachers' Association, and the District Principals. The last two steps call for the creation of a Secondary Education Task Force charged with examining the implications and recommendations contained within the study. To date, 7 of the 10 steps have been completed and while it is too early to claim success, it appears that the numerous problems encountered during the feedback process are being dealt with quite effectively. (EJS)

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MOVING THE ORGANIZATION

To pose a research question which purports to study the secondary school is an ambiguous proposition. The secondary schools are characterized by some very profound, deeply rooted structures, and a great deal of historical baggage which combine with other things to yield inertia. Inertia is a powerful force and with respect to the secondary school, external forces have historically never been strong enough to fundamentally alter either the organization or the practices within it.

The purpose of the secondary study was to look specifically at secondary schools in the context of the Surrey School District and at the same time to view the Canadian context with the appropriate references to research in the United States. At the heart of the question lay several assumptions. First, that it is possible to study the secondary school and come to understand it and come to understand the complex set of variables which are part of the culture of the high schools. Second, that some of the variables when combined in certain ways work to yield increased student success within those institutions. Third, that some of the variables when combined in certain ways tend to work against student success. Fourth, that it is possible to analyze all these complex variables, consider them in the context of the situational culture of any given school, list the implications, and provide recommendations which would be helpful to decision-makers and educational practitioners in developing plans to help secondary schools grow and improve so that student success rates increase.

Continued . . .

The study was comprehensive and included a thorough review of the literature, case studies of each of the sixteen schools and a final empirical stage which saw data collected using interviews and questionnaires from teachers, students school administrators as well as from district administrators, school board members, and parents. Completing the study was a major task and throughout the process issues of protocol required constant attention. The stake-holder groups in a school district have key people who are ever watchful and skeptical. Keeping these groups "on-side" during an action research project is not an easy task and they require regular nurturing usually in the form of reassurance; however, the work was completed and the study turned over to the school district. How now to move the organization?

The Management Committee of the school district consists of the Superintendent of Schools, Deputy Superintendent of Schools, three Assistant Superintendents of Schools, four Directors of Instruction and two business officials. The district is functionally organized and the Assistant Superintendents and Deputy have responsibilities for Curriculum and Instructional Services, Human Resources, Special Education, and School Operations. School Operations include all the elementary and secondary schools divided in the school district into four zones. Each zone is headed by a Director of Instruction. Each Director of Instruction sits on the Management Committee although each reports directly to the Assistant Superintendent, School Operations.

The educational administrators, including the chief executive officer have (with one exception) been secondary school principals and one-half of

them were secondary school principals in the Surrey school district. It is very important to understand this in order to gain insight about how research can inform change in the high school. Notwithstanding the integrity of the research design and near flawless implementation of the process, research presented to the field from which it was drawn, lives with the reality of the day-to-day operation of a complex organization. In the organization politics, history, relationships, etc. have a background, a current context, and the reality of the dynamics of working together in the future. The support of the Management Committee is crucial to whether or not the research sits on a shelf gathering dust--in effect killed--or becomes a dynamic from which change is even remotely possible. With a few exceptions the problems so forcefully described in the literature and underlined in this research were typically not perceived by those on the Management Committee. Perhaps ownership, ie... being a part of the system as discussed earlier, is partially to blame--perhaps the main reason. Whatever the reasons, the reaction from the group (normatively) is described in the literature on death and dying: anger, denial, bargaining, depression, acceptance.

First, anger. "This is outrageous, scandalous, drop the study; our schools don't deserve this kind of treatment. The researchers had an axe to grind, they are from the university and know nothing about the reality of schools. Who authorized this study?" (A search for the guilty) There was a great deal of emotion at this stage, much of it stemming from a cursory reading of the data followed by personal projections and opinions. During this period it is particularly important to not deny the feelings being displayed. A great deal of gentleness is required and time is critical. People

require time and an in depth reading before they are ready to move out of the anger phase. Ultimately the anger subsides and is replaced by denial.

Denial takes many forms. "The data are inaccurate; they are describing schools which do not exist in our school district. The researchers have highly personalized the data selected for inclusion in the study and what the researchers said and how they said it is more a function of data being sifted through the researchers' own value systems." This section of the process ultimately gives birth to at first an aggressive form of bargaining followed by a more gentle, persuasive form of the same thing.

Bargaining. Comments such as, "I will agree to keep this in the study but you have got to drop that." Ultimately, by way of example, it was agreed that the case study portion of the research would not be included in the final report but would be used by each Director of Instruction in private meetings with each principal who reports to that Director. The material was viewed as being to situation specific and very sensitive. It was believed that if the information got out, certain people would be professionally embarrassed and that it might even have career implications. Etc. The researcher has to be particularly careful during the bargaining stage that the "baby isn't thrown out with the bath-water." The purist of researchers, if not careful at this juncture, may lose the entire study. Careful negotiations are required because the point is that research should drive the change process and pride of authorship should not eliminate an opportunity to finally see data driving decisions in educational settings.

The next phase is depression. Depression is the correct word and the most accurate description of feelings. It is a realization that some things are

really bad in those high schools and that they are not getting any better notwithstanding the attempts at reform through the "effective schools movement" and all of the resulting school improvement projects conducted mainly through professional development and activities. This is depressing! People rarely saw themselves as needing to change their practice to resolve those problems. Finally, acceptance.

Acceptance may be too strong of a word. Conditional acceptance or tentative acceptance better describes this final phase. The consensus was to develop a strategic plan for the Management Committee to approve and to gently work with the school board to develop proposed actions which would be politically sensitive

The strategic plan was titled: "Secondary Study: Strategies for Action, 1990-91." The plan which was accepted included the following:

1. Strategic plan presented to Management Committee for modification and approval.

2. Trustee inservice session on the final report including strategic plan as approved by Management Committee, (principal researchers present).

3. Study presented to secondary principals and vice principals with concurrent inservice session at a special secondary administrative officers' meeting.

4 Study presented to president of Surrey Teachers' Association (Teacher Union) with a full briefing; copies of the Study for the table officers of the S.T.A. given to the president for distribution.

5. Copies of the Study given to the Advisory Committee of the Secondary Study at a meeting with a full briefing, (Principal Researchers present).

6. Multiple copies of the study given to each secondary school for secondary teachers. Principals and Vice Principals to brief staff from notes and understandings gathered from the Principals' and Vice Principals' inservice session.

7. Copies of the Study given to District Principals, with briefing and subsequent distribution to district staff.

8. Copies of the Study given to the Late Intermediate Task Force and the Graduation Task Force with full briefing. (Both task forces have been formed in the district to assist in bringing about a new school organization and curriculum framework resulting from the Royal Commission on Education Report, 1989)

9. A call for a Secondary Education Task Force be made with representation from administrators, secondary teachers, S.T.A. executive, School Operations, Curriculum and Instructional Services, Human Resources, Special Education and Trustees. (Student involvement on this task force has since been requested by school board members and they will be added)

10. The Task Force to be charged with studying the implications and recommendations contained within the Secondary Study, cross-referencing them with both the Vision 36/20 Study, (A local two year-long investigation into the future of education in the school district

which concluded among other things that education should be learner focussed and holistic), and the Year 2000 document (The title of the Ministry of Education's response to the Royal Commission on Education which given province-wide direction to education in British Columbia for the next ten years) and developing a five-year plan to address both the change process and discrepancies between the ideal and the status quo.

Todate, steps 1 through 7 have been implemented. The session with the Principals and Vice Principals was very quiet. At first, it seemed to be too quiet, there were very few questions yet throughout the study if a particular level in the organization was criticized by teachers more than any other, it was the administration level. In the weeks which followed this session, numerous questions of clarification and, "What do you want me to do now?" followed. Copies of the study including the thesis on the dropouts have been sent to each teacher and a complete briefing with the teachers' union has been concluded. Following this, schools have been divided into sections of four and follow-up day-long sessions have occurred with each section of four schools given by the author. The section consist of the Principal and four staff members from each of the four schools. These sessions have focussed on the part of the Study titled, "Deep Structures." It is believed by the author that this portion of the study seemed the logical place to begin. It should be noted that the four staff members from each school are department heads and specifically people who the Principals believe to be key opinion influencers in the school. The most recent session took place on March 11, 1991 to give an indication of the current timing of the sharing of the data.

The inservice session with the school board was fascinating. Each board member had read the reports and came prepared to ask many skill-testing questions. The principal researchers were present during the session. The board was particularly fascinated with the part of the study which focussed on the drop-outs. In fact, that very evening they lobbied the author to draft a notice of motion for the next board meeting where publicly the board could take some visible, action. This has been delayed through persuasion in order to preserve the long-term potential good of the study as a way to inform change in the high school.

Characteristic to date of all the feed-back sessions is generally a type of unwillingness to first acknowledge that problems exit. The feedback to all groups confirms many of the original findings from the general study such as the isolation of teachers, loose coupling of the system, etc. The research findings are providing both a direction and stimulus for change. However, clear from all of the above, is the fact that many problems are encountered during the feedback process. All of the problems encountered are being dealt with quite effectively and this is not through chance.

The Study aimed at producing results which would be fed back to the district in ways that could bring about reform among the sixteen schools studied. It is too early to determine whether or not this will be the case. What is clear at this point is that there is a very real phenomenological set of actions which result from research directed proposals when those proposals are visited upon a school district which lives in the here and now and keeps on operating in the public arena Monday through Friday during the school year. Some of these phenomena have been described above and so far are

being met with plans which are assisting the district in effectively using research to drive the change process. Much more needs to be done and much more will be learned. It is much too early yet to be able to claim success; but, it looks hopeful.